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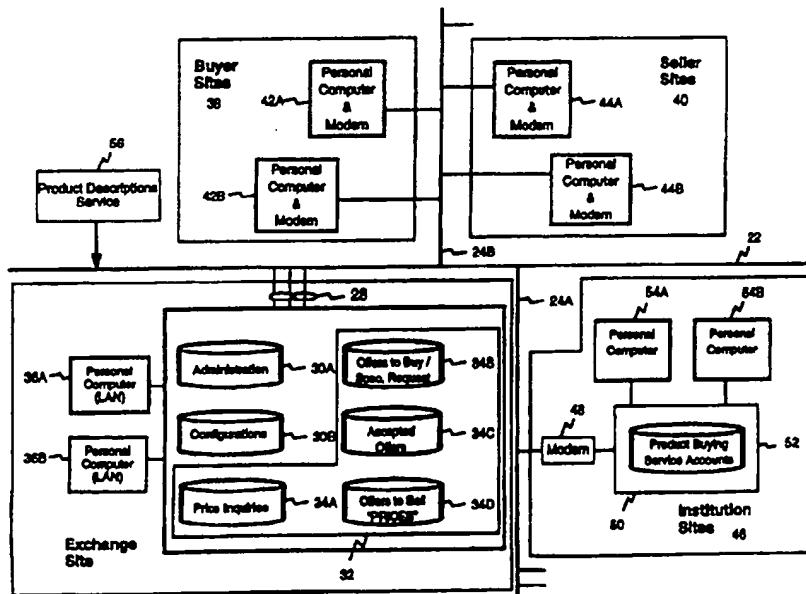
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(54) Title: PRODUCT EXCHANGE SYSTEM



(57) Abstract

An exchange system (32) for facilitating the purchase of products is described. The system is coupled, in one embodiment, to a communications link (28). Potential product purchasers (38) and sellers (40) may access the exchange system (32) via the network (24B), and submit offers and/or pricing requests to such system. In response to the requests, the system processor retrieves the stored data from the respective databases (30B), and causes such data to be transmitted to the local site for display. The exchange systems also execute certain functions in response to commands and data transmitted from buyer sites (38), seller sites (40) and institution sites (46).

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Product Exchange System

Field of the Invention

The present invention generally relates to product purchase systems, and more particularly, to a product system accessible via a communications network which facilitates the purchase of products.

Background of the Invention

When purchasing a product, a purchaser must first determine which product, including brand name, model, color and other features, best meets his needs. Once the purchaser has an established interest in purchasing a particular product, the purchaser typically visits, in person or by telephone, a few stores that sell the product to determine the best price. Once the best price is determined, all things being equal, the purchaser usually buys from the store selling this particular product at the best price.

It would be desirable and advantageous to provide a product exchange system which enables a potential product purchaser to easily and quickly review specific product configurations of interest in combination with final pricing information for those same products in a particular geographic region. It also would be desirable and advantageous to enable a potential product purchaser to ascertain the best price for a particular product and to "lock in" to a specific offer via the system without having to actually visit, or make direct contact with particular sellers.

An object of the present invention is to simplify and reduce the time required, for both the buyer and seller, in completing a product sales transaction.

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Another object of the present invention is to enable potential purchasers to quickly and easily ascertain offers for the sale of products in a particular geographic region of interest.

Still another object of the present invention is to provide a product exchange system which enables a potential product purchaser to easily and quickly review all specific product configurations of interest in combination with final pricing information for products in a particular geographic region.

Yet another object of the present invention is to provide an exchange system which enables a potential product purchaser to ascertain the best price for a particular product and to "lock in" to a specific offer via the system without having to actually visit, or make direct contact with, the seller.

Summary of the Invention

These and other objects and advantages are achieved by a product exchange system which includes, in one embodiment, a file server having a plurality of databases storing specific information related to products offered for sale. The exchange system further includes a processor coupled to the databases and programmed to perform certain tasks in response to price inquiries, special requests, offers to sell, offers to buy and acceptance of such offers.

Specifically, the exchange system is coupled to a communications link, such as the telephone lines or the Internet. A potential product purchaser may access, from a remote site, the exchange system via the network, and submit requests to such system. In response to some requests, the system processor retrieves stored data from the respective databases, and causes such data to be transmitted to the remote site for display. The exchange system also executes certain functions in response to commands and data transmitted from seller sites and institution sites,

e.g., banks, other lenders or agents for buyers or sellers. The system enables a potential purchaser to, for example, browse the offers in a particular geographic region for the particular product of interest and to lock-in to a particular offer to sell.

5 The system described above enables a potential product purchaser to easily and quickly review all final pricing information for a variety of products and configurations in a particular geographic region. In addition, such system enables, if desired, the buyer to "lock in" a specific offer via the system.

10 Brief Description of the Drawings

Figure 1 illustrates a system architecture for a system in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 2 is a functional block diagram illustrating the tasks performed by each hardware block shown in Figure 1.

15 Figure 3 illustrates the system database structure for the system illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 4 illustrates a sequence of steps executed by one embodiment of the exchange system as part of the product purchasing process.

20 Figure 5 illustrates the various administrative tasks performed by the exchange system.

Figure 6 illustrates one embodiment of a sequence of process steps executed to access the exchange system.

Figure 7 illustrates a sequence of process steps to be performed in connection with creating a seller account in the exchange system.

25 Figure 8 illustrates the process steps executed in connection with updating configuration data stored in the configuration database of the system.

Figure 9 illustrates the sequence of process steps executed in loading product offers into a system database.

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Figure 10 illustrates a sequence of process steps associated with executing offers to buy and special requests.

Figure 11 illustrates a sequence of process steps associated with enabling review/update of prior offers contained in the offer to sell 5 database of the system.

Figure 12 illustrates a sequence of process steps executed in connection with acknowledgement of acceptance of an offer.

Detailed Description of the Drawings

Figure 1 illustrates a system architecture for a system 20 which 10 includes a communications network 22 having multiple branches 24A-B. Network 22 may, for example, be a wide area network such as the network known as "Internet" or may be one of many other types of networks. Accordingly, although one embodiment of the present invention is 15 described below in the context of a network such as Internet, it should be understood that the present invention may be used in connection with many other types of communications networks.

One embodiment of an exchange system 26 is illustrated in Figure 1 as being coupled to network 22 via a multi-line communications control and 20 router 28. System 26 includes, for example, a file server having a processor and memory storage. Such file servers are commercially available, such as the IBM RS-600 or HP-9000. Databases 30A-B and 32 are illustrated as forming a part of system 26. Databases 30A-B and 32 would, for example, be part of the memory storage of the file server.

Administration database 30A is utilized for storing data related to 25 tasks executed by system 26. Configurations database 30B stores data related to specific product configurations which may be accessed, via network 22, from remote sites. Database 32 includes a price inquiries database 34A, an offer to buy and special request database 34B, an accepted offers database 34C and an offers to sell ("prices") database 34D.

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A plurality of personal computers such as personal computers 36A and 36B are coupled to system 26 via a local area network (LAN) to enable access to system 26 without requiring access to network 22.

Buyer sites 38 and seller sites 40 are shown as being coupled to branch 24B of network 22. Particularly, potential buyers, through personal computers and modems 42A and 42B, may access exchange system 26 via network 22. Similarly, sellers, through personal computers and modems 44A and 44B, may access exchange system 26 via network 22. Of course, the functions performed by system 26 for such buyers and sellers are different, as explained hereinafter in more detail.

Institution sites 46 are shown as being coupled to branch 24A of network 22. Such institutions may include lending institutions such as banks. Institutions may access exchange system 26 through modem 48, coupled to a file server 50 having a product buying service accounts database 52, and via personal computers 54A and 54B. Account information for product purchases made by buyers at buyer sites 38 via system 26 may be stored in database 52.

It should be understood, of course, that the architecture illustrated in Figure 1 may vary depending upon the network utilized. Also, many additional buyer sites 38, seller sites 40 and institution sites 46 may be coupled to system 26. Further, a geographic area such as a country, e.g., the United States of America, could be divided into regions with separate systems 26 serving such regions.

Figure 2 illustrates, for sites 38, 40 and 46 and system 26, some functions performed at such sites 38, 40 and 46 and by system 26. More specifically, with respect to system 26, product configuration master files which include a base description, an options description and descriptions of other information pertinent to particular products, are maintained by system 26. System 26 also maintains specific accounts related to sellers, buyers and institutions that use system 26. Certain activities also are tracked, for

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example, for buyer inquiries, offers and special requests, by system 26.

Further, seller price offer activity and specific price offers are maintained within databases in system 26.

With respect to buyer sites 38, at such sites, a potential buyer may, 5 via personal computer and modem 42A-B, enter commands to cause system 26 to execute routines to enable such buyer to review pricing, make offers, special requests and accept a seller offer. At seller sites 40, sellers may, via personal computer and modem 44A-B, enter commands to cause system 26 to execute routines to enable such seller to, by a mass upload to system 10 26 or by exception, maintain offers by base model and options in databases of system 26. In addition, sellers may respond to specific buyer acceptances and special requests communicated to seller sites 40 from buyer sites 38 via system 26. The manner in which certain functions are executed by system 26 is described hereinafter in more detail.

15 At institution sites 46, institutions may provide pricing service for customers via system 26. Such institutions may also maintain, in file server 50, information regarding individual accounts and offers.

Product configuration services 56 may provide data to system 26 related to particular product brands and models. In this manner, system 26 20 may compliment existing services which provide, on-line, product configuration information.

Figure 3 illustrates various types of information stored in databases 30B and 34A-E of exchange system 26. No particular hierarchy is intended to be expressed or implied by the arrows shown in Figure 3. 25 Rather, such arrows are only intended to facilitate an understanding of such data and the interrelationships. Further, it should be understood that although specific databases are referred to, the data in any one of the databases may be distributed or combined in many different configurations with data from other databases. Therefore, the database configuration 30 illustrated in Figure 3 and described below is provided primarily to

facilitate an understanding of system 26, and should not be construed as a limitation of system 26.

Referring specifically to Figure 3, in configurations database 30B, information regarding new products is stored. Such information includes, 5 for each designated product, make, brand, style and other descriptive.

Such information typically provides a detailed description of each particular product. Note that although information regarding a particular product may be stored in configurations database 30B, a particular seller may not have made a specific offer for that specific configuration. Therefore, data stored in configurations database 30B may not necessarily match 10 information stored in offers to sell database 34D.

With respect to offers to sell database 34D, information such as an identification of the seller making an offer, the seller region, and pricing information by brand/model, style and descriptions is stored. Such 15 information identifies, by sellers having specific geographic selling locations, offers to sell certain products.

In price inquiries database 34A, information related to potential buyer inquiries is stored. Such information includes an identification of each buyer, by identification number, who makes an inquiry to offers to sell database 34D, the buyer's geographic region, and the product 20 brand/model, style and options which were the subject of the buyer inquiry.

Buyer offers and special request database 34B is utilized by system 26 for storing information related to offers made by buyers and special requests made by potential buyers, via system 26, to a seller. For 25 example, a buyer may request an updated price offer based on a unique selection of options. For each such buyer offer and special request, buyer and seller identifications, geographic region, and make/model, style and options information is stored in database 34B.

System 26 stores, in accepted offers database 34C and for each offer 30 accepted via system 26, an identification of the buyer and seller and an

offer number, which is assigned to the accepted offer by system 26. Such information may be used, for example, for billing purposes.

With respect to administration database 34E, information related to seller accounts, buyer accounts, and geographic locations for buyers and sellers is stored. Also, institution accounts, transactions logs, system billing, and accounts receivable information is stored in such database 34E.

As pointed out above, the specific architecture and structure of databases 30B and 34A-E may, of course, vary and is not limited to the specific structure illustrated in Figure 3. In addition, although databases 10 30B and 34A-E are shown as being separate, such databases could be consolidated or distributed in many other configurations. Further, information in addition to the specific data described above could be stored in, and form a part of, such databases.

Figure 4 illustrates functions 100 performed by exchange system 26. 15 Functions 100 are illustrated in a logic diagram form. However, it should be understood that such functions 100 could be performed in any sequence, in a distributed manner, or in parallel, and no specific execution order is intended, expressed or implied, by such flow. Also, any one of the functions illustrated in Figure 4 could be performed without necessarily 20 performing, within a certain time limitation, any of the other functions.

Referring now particularly to Figure 4, upon initialization 102 of system 26, functions performed by system 26 include maintaining seller, buyer and institution accounts 104, maintaining new product configuration masters 106, and maintaining price offers by sellers by make, model, style 25 and options 108. Such maintenance functions are described hereinafter in more detail and generally require maintaining current information in the various databases of system 26.

Exchange system 26 also validates price offers 110. For example, once a seller at a seller site 40 communicates a specific offer to sell a 30 product, system 26, prior to loading such offer in database 34D, displays

the information which is the subject of the offer to the seller. If the information is correct, the seller enters a command on computer 44A, for example, and system 26 then loads the validated information into database 34D.

5 System 26 also is configured to determine, upon receiving a buyer command, a low market price 110 for a selected specific configuration within a designated geographic region. Particularly, a potential buyer at a buyer site 38 may want to place a specific "offer to buy" or identify a specific desired product configuration and a particular geographic region in which such buyer would be willing to travel within to obtain a product.

10 Such information is then loaded into computer 42A, for example, through a graphical user interface. Such information is then transmitted to system 26. Using such inputted information, offers to sell database 34D is scanned to identify matches for the selected product configuration offered for sale in the selected geographic region. The selling prices are then compared for such matches, and the lowest selling price is then caused to be displayed by system 26 at computer 42A. Exchange system 26 also enables, upon receipt of a buyer command, a buyer to review seller price offers 112 for a variety of products.

15 If a buyer desires to make an offer or a special request of a seller, such requests may be made to a seller 114 through system 26. Exchange system 26 also enables a buyer to review and update pricing inquiries 116, and if a buyer accepts a seller offer via system 26, system 26 generates a buyer acceptance notification 118.

20 With respect to offers to buy and special requests 114, exchange system 26 communicates such offers and requests to the buyer designated seller and enables such seller to respond to the offer or request via system 26. If a seller response to a special request is acceptable, the buyer may accept the seller's offer and system 26 will generate acceptance notification 118. Exchange 26 also generates, for the seller, a notification of offer

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acceptance 122. Of course, if a seller accepts an offer to buy 114, exchange 26 generates a notification of the seller acceptance.

Administration tasks performed by system 26 generate data to be stored in administration database 38 (Figure 1). More specifically, and as shown in Figure 5, system 26 monitors account activity and data 124, manages deposits and credits 126, maintains account billings and collections 128 and performs periodic backup and file storage operations 130. Data related to such activities is loaded in administration database 30A and may later be utilized, for example, to generate buyer and seller billing for access and use of system 26.

Figure 6 illustrates a sequence of process steps 150 executed in connection with performing a buyer sign-on 152 to exchange 26. Specifically, to perform a sign-on 152 at a buyer site 38 (Figure 1), personal computer 42A, for example, first accesses network 22 via an on-line service 154 such as CompuServe. A link 156 is established through communications network 22 with system 26. System 26 then requests buyer identification information to determine whether the specific user is a first-time potential buyer 158. If the buyer is a first time user, then buyer information is added 160 to the administration database 30A. System 26 then validates the buyer's entries 162, for example, by displaying such entries to the buyer at computer 42A. If all the entries are not correct 164, then the buyer may edit such entries. Otherwise, if the entries have been correctly entered, system 26 acknowledges proper access by the buyer and displays a menu 166 at personal computer 42A, for example. If the buyer is not a first-time buyer, operations would proceed directly to acknowledging the buyer and displaying a menu 166.

The menu displayed to a buyer, for example, is a graphical user interface which enables the buyer to select from various options such as shopping 168, offers 170, and account 172. Once the buyer has selected an option, system 26 responds to such selection. For example, if the buyer

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selects "shopping" 168, since this service is not executed by system 26, system 26 prompts the buyer to logoff system 26. On the other hand, if the buyer selects "offers" 170, then system 26 executes the sequence of process steps associated with reviewing seller price offers 176. If the user 5 selects account 172, then system 26 will cause account activity 178 for the subject buyer to be displayed at the buyer's computer.

Figure 7 illustrates a sequence of process steps 200 associated with a seller sign-on operation 202. Specifically, a seller accesses system 26 through a personal computer and modem configuration 44A, for example, through branch 24B of network 22. A communications link is then completed with system 26. Once a seller has accessed system 26, system 26 determines whether the particular seller is a new seller to the system 10 204. Such a determination is made, for example, by checking the administration database 30A for the seller identification.

If the seller is a new seller to system 26, then the seller is prompted 15 to enter name, address, contact, telephone and fax information 206. System 26 then assigns the seller an identification number and an SMSA region 208. System 26 also sets all account balances for the seller to zero 210 and adds the seller account 212 to administration database 30A. Once 20 such an account is established, the seller may update the seller account master information 214 stored in administration database 30A.

If the seller is not a new seller 204, then system 26 will prompt the seller and request entry of new or updated data 216. A seller may update 25 information in any and all fields for information stored by system 26 with respect to such seller 218. Once such data has been entered, then system 26 updates the account master for the seller 214 stored in administration database 30A. Once all such information has been entered and stored by system 26, all the updated account information is caused, by system 26, to be displayed at personal computer 44A, for example, to enable the seller to 30 review such information and to ensure its correctness 216.

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Figure 8 illustrates a sequence of process steps 250 executed by system 26 to perform a batch update 252 of all product configuration data stored in configuration database 30B. Particularly, process steps 250 would be executed by system 26 on a weekly or some other regular basis.

5 Such update would be performed to ensure that all new master files related to products being offered through system 26 have been updated and saved in an appropriate manner.

Referring to process 250 in more detail, system 26 first reads/uploads the latest source file configurations from configurations 10 database 30B. System 26 also may read/upload configurations from other sources such as third party configuration sources 56. Once such configurations are uploaded into active memory of system 26, then the newly entered product configurations since the last batch update, which may be stored in a buffer memory, are compared with the existing 15 configurations in configurations database 30B at step 256. If for any particular product configuration such configuration does not exist in configuration database 30B, a new record is created for such new product configuration 258 and the new record is added to the other records which will be stored in configurations database 30B. If the product configuration 20 is already stored in configurations database 30B, then operations proceed to block 260, where all information is updated 260 by copying all records in active memory of system 26 to configurations data base 30B. Such updated information in configurations database 30B forms the new master records which may be accessed by both buyers and sellers as described above.

25 Figure 9 illustrates a sequence of process steps 300 which would be performed by seller at a site 40 on a personal computer and modem configuration 44A, for example, to enter an offer into system 26. More specifically, once a seller at a seller site 40 has initialized 302 system 26, system 26 prompts 304 such seller as to whether such seller would like to 30 update seller data stored in the various databases of system 26. System 26

then merges 306 information from product configurations database 30B for the most recently updated master records and from the offers to sell database 34D. Such information is merged by system 26 to form an integrated new record for an interim seller's offer file at site 40 displayed at computer 44A. If the seller determines to update or create new records, the seller may modify the records as displayed and upon completion of such updating, the new/updated records are loaded to form an updated offers to sell database 34D. The seller at the seller site 40 also is prompted by system 26 as to whether such seller would like to update the offers to sell database 34D for the seller's records by exception 308. If a seller does desire to update such offers by exception, then such seller may update specific information, such as pricing information, by a selected amount or percentage 310. Such updated information is stored in the interim file and may subsequently be loaded into database 34D by system 26 at step 318.

If a seller does not desire to update such offers by exception, the seller is then prompted by system 26 as to whether such seller would desire to update the pricing information for each configuration by a fixed amount or percentage 312. If a seller would like to perform such an update, the seller may indicate the general dollar amount mark-up or percentage over factory invoice at 314. Again, such updated information is stored in the interim file and may subsequently be loaded into database 34D by system 26.

If the seller does not desire to perform any such updates, or once such updates have been completed via step 318, then system 26 causes the display at seller site 40 to indicate that the price offer database update has been completed 316.

Administration database 30A is then updated with new account balances for the seller performed functions 320. The seller could, of course, have a price offer report printed-out at seller site 40. If the seller selects to have such information printed, then the price offer report is

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printed-out at the seller site 40 from the updated records in offer to sell database 34D for that seller by make, brand, options and style.

Internally within system 26, and for current records within offers to sell database 34D for each product configurations, such records may be sorted by configuration to identify and store such information by lowest offer first. Such information may be stored in database 34D for all offers to sell in this manner.

Figure 10 illustrates a sequence of process steps 350 associated with enabling a buyer at buyer site 38 to make an offer to buy in a selected geographic region or a special request to a specific seller at a seller site 40 via exchange system 26. Such operations are referred to as an offer to buy or a special seller request. Particularly, once a buyer accesses 352 system 26 at a buyer site 38, the buyer sign-on process is executed as illustrated in Figure 6 as process 150. Through such sequence of process steps, buyer information may be reviewed and revised 352 from administration database 30A.

The buyer may then enter and select a make, model, options and style of product which the buyer desires to purchase 354. The buyer then selects whether to make an "offer to buy" or a "request" 358. If the buyer desires to make an offer to buy, then the buyer enters and validates the specific product configuration related to the offer 360. Once such configuration information is entered, the buyer then enters the price 362 and selected geographic regions 364. Exchange system 26 then receives this information and sends an offers message to sellers within the selected geographic region 366 and updates offers to buy/special request database 34B.

If the buyers desires to make a request 358, then the buyer enters and validates the product configuration data related to the request 370, enters special options 372, and selects a specific seller from the account master in database 30A of system 26. Exchange system 26 then receives

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the special requests, transmits the request to the specified seller and updates the special requests database 34B with a copy of the subject request. The message may be stored, for example, at the personal computer 44A at the selected seller site 40 and the message may be stored in an E-mail location specified by the seller.

Figure 11 illustrates a sequence of process steps 400 which would be executed by system 26 in connection with a buyer accepting a seller offer from the offers stored in offer to sell database 34D. Particularly, a buyer at a buyer site 38, on a personal computer 42A, for example, accesses 402 system 26 and indicates whether the buyer wants to review existing seller offers by descriptions 404. If the buyer wants to review such existing description and price selections, then such information is obtained from the offers to sell database 34D and from any seller responses in special requests database 34B, and such information is displayed to the potential buyer at step 406.

The buyer may add, change or delete a particular product configuration as indicated at a step 408. Specifically, if a buyer selects or desires to delete a particular configuration, the make, model, option and style would be deleted from the buyer's price inquiries which are stored in the price inquiries database 34A into the local memory of personal computer 42A.

Once a buyer has selected a particular description which the buyer desires to have pricing information on, system 26 first determines whether such a description is a valid description 410. Such a determination is made, for example, by comparing the selected description with the descriptions stored in descriptions database 30B. If the description is not valid, then operations return to step 408 in which a buyer may select a different description.

If the description is valid, operations proceed to step 412 in which for the particular descriptions selected, the prices are obtained by system

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26 from the offer to sell database 34D and such information is added to the particular description information currently then being displayed at personal computer 34A and are added to the price inquiry database 34A. If, upon the buyer's review, there is at least one offer which is acceptable 414,
5 system 26 validates acceptance of the offer by rechecking the data and ensuring that the offer to sell from offer to sell database 34D is still current 420. If such information is validated, then the accepted offer information is stored in accepted offers database 34C and for the particular seller and buyer, the account balances are updated 422 and stored in a buyer's
10 accounts transaction log in system 26. If no offers are acceptable 414, processing proceeds directly to step 422.

Figure 12 illustrates a sequence of process steps 450 executed by system 26 in connection with the seller and buyer introduction process 452. Particularly, once a buyer has accepted an offer in accordance with the
15 sequence of steps 400 as illustrated in Figure 11, the seller that made the offer is informed of such acceptance by system 26 and may acknowledge, via personal computer 44A at seller site 40, for example, the particular acceptance of the offer or a special request as stored in accepted offers database 34C and special request database 34B, as indicated at step 454.

20 Once the seller receives information regarding such an acceptance as set forth in step 454, then the seller may make contact with the potential buyer 456 via E-mail, telephone or even through system 26. If the transaction is concluded between the buyer and the seller, then accepted offers database 34C is updated by the seller at seller site 40 and system 26
25 at step 458. System 26 then executes administrative tasks with database 30A as indicated at 460 and the seller account, buyer account, transaction log is updated in administration database 30A.

30 The above described system 26 enables a potential product purchaser to easily and quickly review all models and other information regarding specific product configurations of interest in combination with

final pricing information for products in a particular geographic region. System 26 also enables a potential product purchaser to ascertain the best price for a particular product and to "lock in" to a specific seller offer via the system.

5 From the preceding description of an embodiment of the present invention, it is evident that the objects of the invention are attained. Although the invention has been described and illustrated in detail, it is to be clearly understood that the same is intended by way of illustration and example only and is not to be taken by way of limitation. Accordingly, the
10 spirit and scope of the invention are to be limited only by the terms of the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A system configured to facilitate the purchase of products, said system comprising a processor programmed to perform predetermined tasks and at least one database having stored therein specific offers related to specific product configurations.
2. A system in accordance with Claim 1 wherein said system is configured to couple to an electronic data communications network.
3. A system in accordance with Claim 2 wherein the electronic data communications network is a wide area network.
4. A system in accordance with Claim 1 wherein said database further has product model data, price inquiry data, special request data and accepted offers data stored therein.
5. A system in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said database comprises a plurality of databases, each of said databases having at least one particular type of data stored therein.
6. A system in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said system is coupled, via a communications network, to a buyer computer and wherein said processor is programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from the buyer computer, upload product configuration data and price data from said database and cause the data to be displayed at the buyer computer.

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7. A system in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said processor is further programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from a buyer computer, generate acceptance data and store the acceptance data.

8. A system in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said system is coupled, via a communications network, to a seller computer and wherein said processor is programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from the seller computer, download product configuration data and price data provided by the seller computer into said database.

9. A system in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said processor is further programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from a seller computer, generate acceptance acknowledgement data and store the acceptance acknowledgement data.

10. A system in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said system is coupled, via a communications network, to a buyer computer and a seller computer, and wherein said processor is programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from the buyer computer, transmit a special request from the buyer computer to the seller computer.

5 11. A system in accordance with Claim 10 wherein said system is coupled, via a communications network, to a seller computer and a buyer computer, and wherein said processor is programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from the seller computer, download product configuration data and price data provided by the seller computer into said database, and upon the receipt of a predetermined command from a buyer computer, generate acceptance data and store the acceptance data.

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12. A system in accordance with Claim 1 wherein the offers include seller offers to sell.

13. A system in accordance with Claim 1 wherein the offers include buyer offers to buy.

14. A system for facilitating the purchase of products, said system configured to couple to an electronic data communications network, said system comprising a processor programmed to perform predetermined tasks and at least one database having stored therein specific offers related to specific products, product configuration data, price inquiry data, special request data and accepted offers data.

5 15. A system in accordance with Claim 14 wherein the electronic data communications network is a wide area network.

16. A system in accordance with Claim 14 wherein said system is coupled, via a communications network, to a buyer computer and wherein said processor is programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from the buyer computer, upload product configuration data and price data from said database and cause the data to be displayed at the buyer computer.

5 17. A system in accordance with Claim 14 wherein said processor is further programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from a buyer computer, generate acceptance data and store the acceptance data.

18. A system in accordance with Claim 14 wherein said system is coupled, via a communications network, to a seller computer and

wherein said processor is programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from the seller computer, download product configuration data and price data provided by the seller computer into said database.

19. A system in accordance with Claim 18 wherein said processor is further programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from a seller computer, generate acceptance acknowledgement data and store the acceptance acknowledgement data.

20. A system in accordance with Claim 14 wherein said system is coupled, via a communications network, to a buyer computer and a seller computer, and wherein said processor is programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from the buyer computer, transmit a special request from the buyer computer to the seller computer.

21. A system in accordance with Claim 20 wherein said system is coupled, via a communications network, to a seller computer and a buyer computer, and wherein said processor is programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command from the seller computer, download product configuration data and price data provided by the seller computer into said database, and upon the receipt of a predetermined command from a buyer computer, generate acceptance data and store the acceptance data.

22. A system in accordance with Claim 14 wherein the offers include seller offers to sell.

23. A system in accordance with Claim 14 wherein the offers include buyer offers to buy.

24. A processor programmed to communicate data relevant to the purchase of a product, said processor being coupled to at least one database having stored therein specific offers related to specific products, product configuration data, price inquiry data, special request data and accepted offers data, said processor being programmed to:

upon the receipt of a predetermined command, upload product configuration data and price data from the database; and

upon the receipt of a predetermined command, generate acceptance data and store the acceptance data.

25. A processor in accordance with Claim 24 wherein said processor is further programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command, download product configuration data and price data provided by the seller computer into said database.

26. A processor in accordance with Claim 24 wherein said processor is further programmed to, upon the receipt of a predetermined command, generate acceptance acknowledgement data and store the acceptance acknowledgement data.

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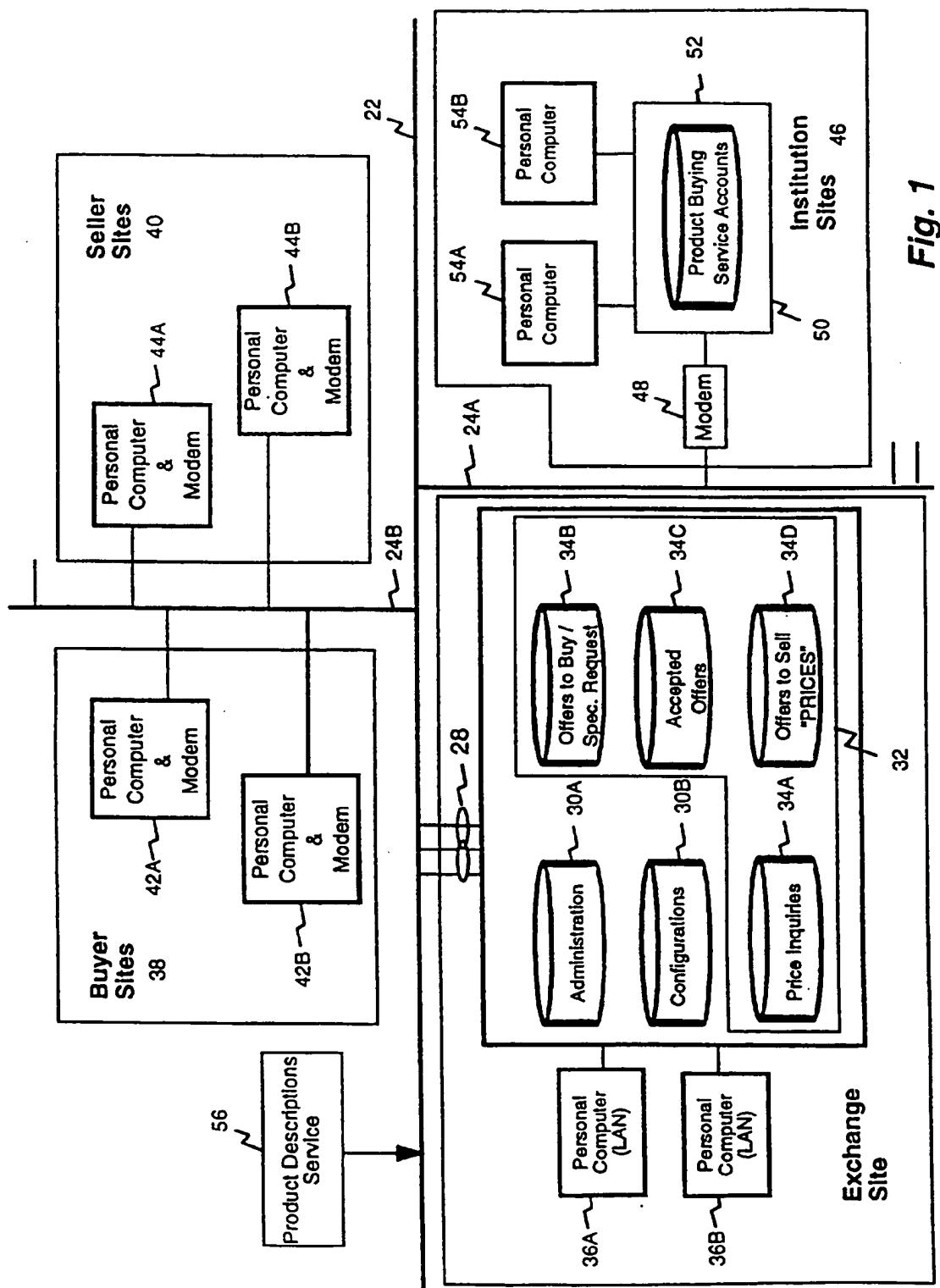


Fig. 1

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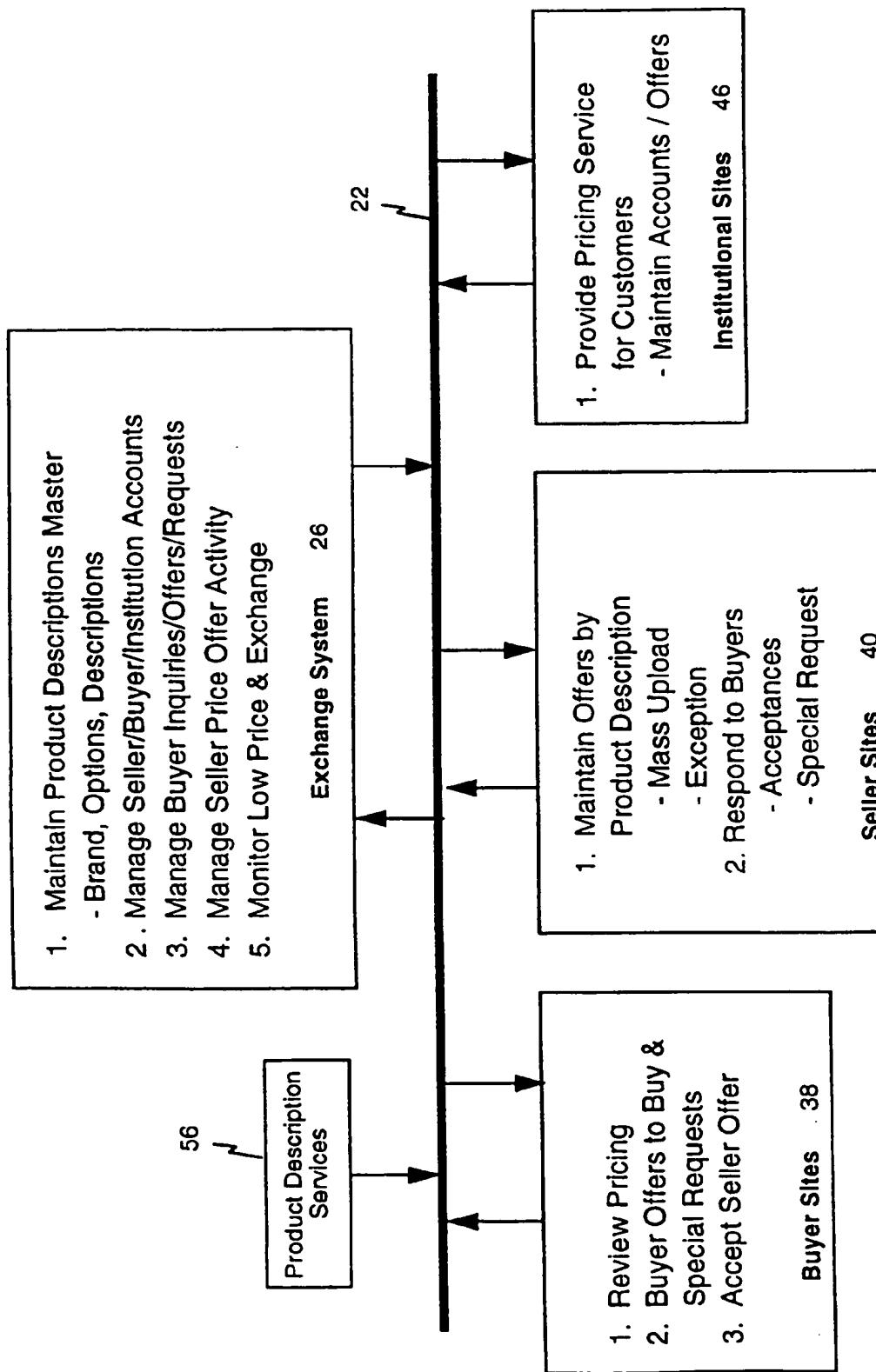
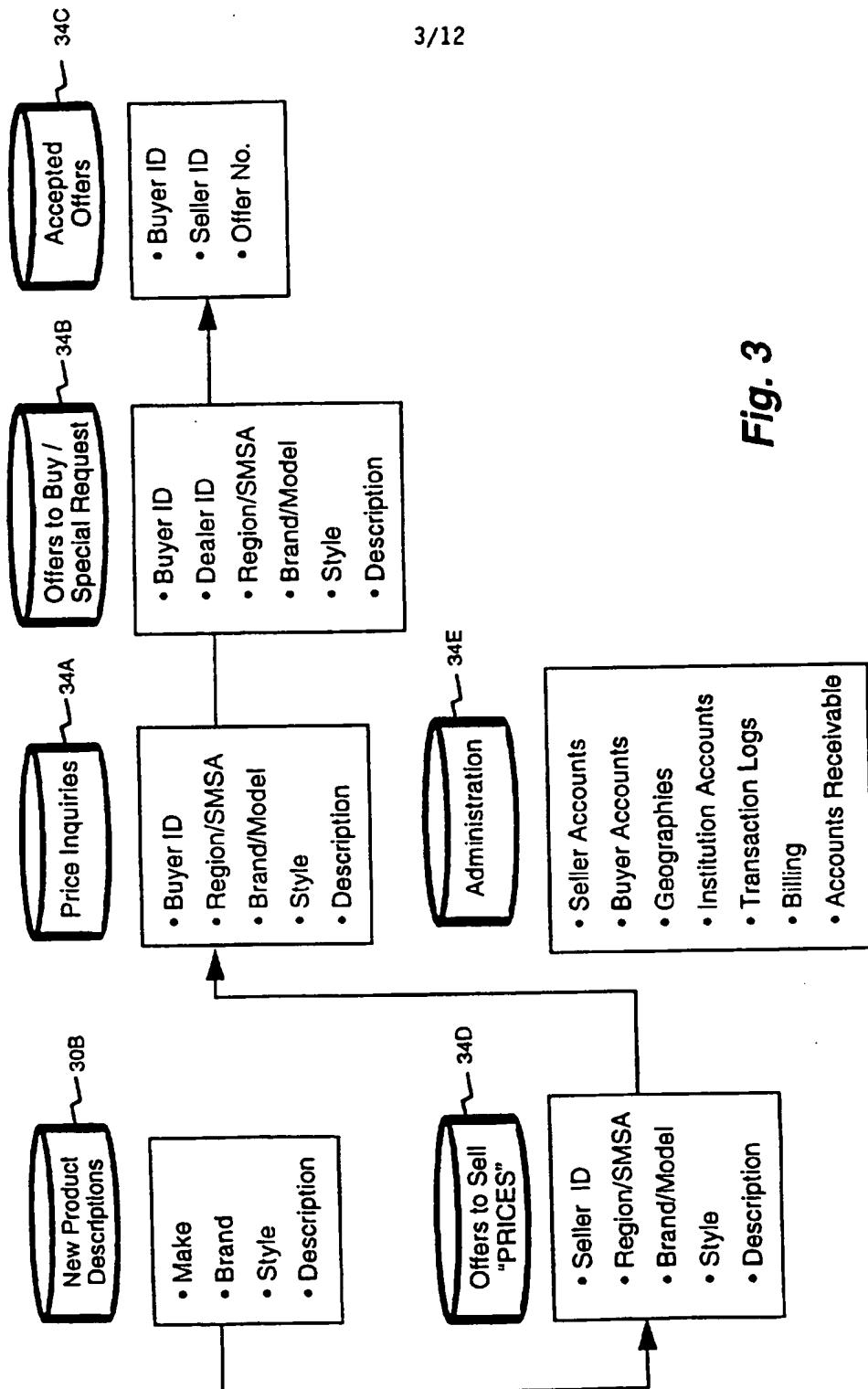
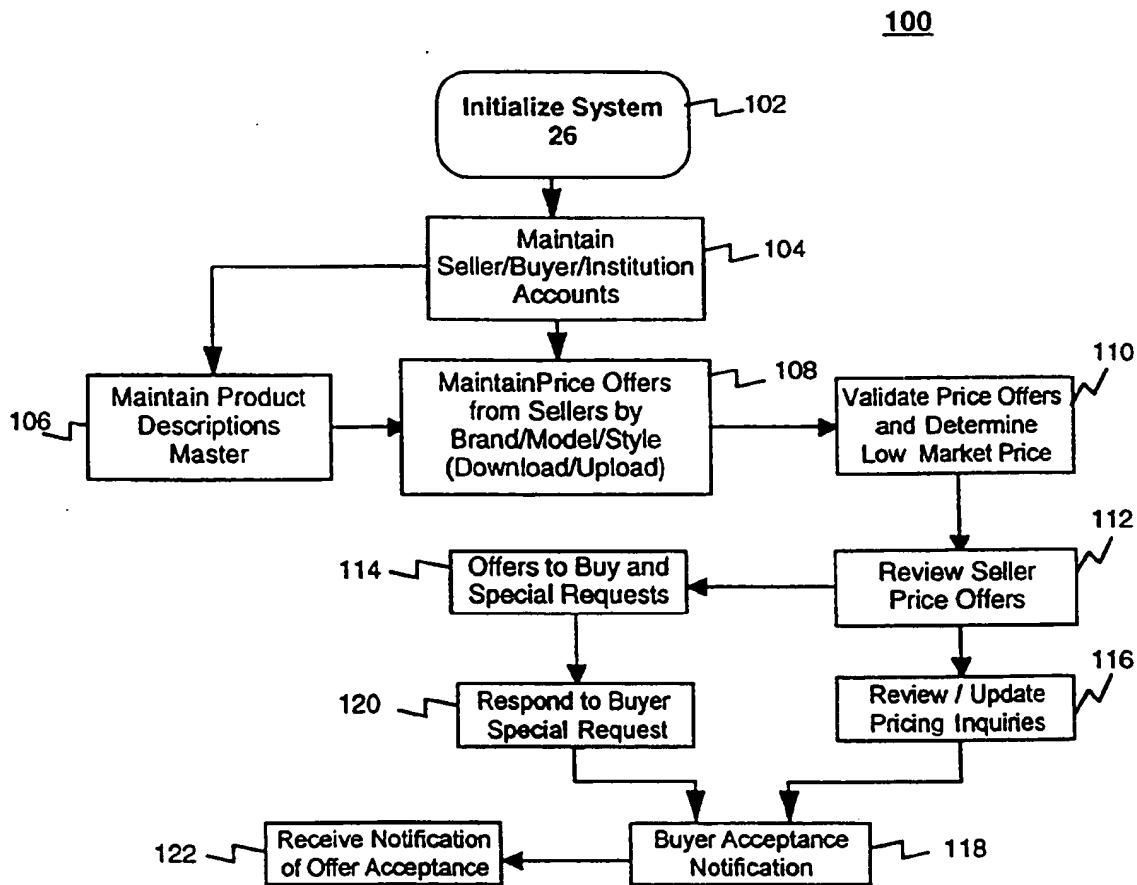


Fig. 2

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*Fig. 4*

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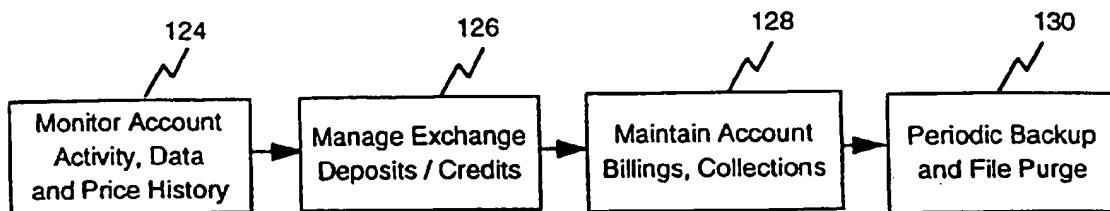


Fig. 5

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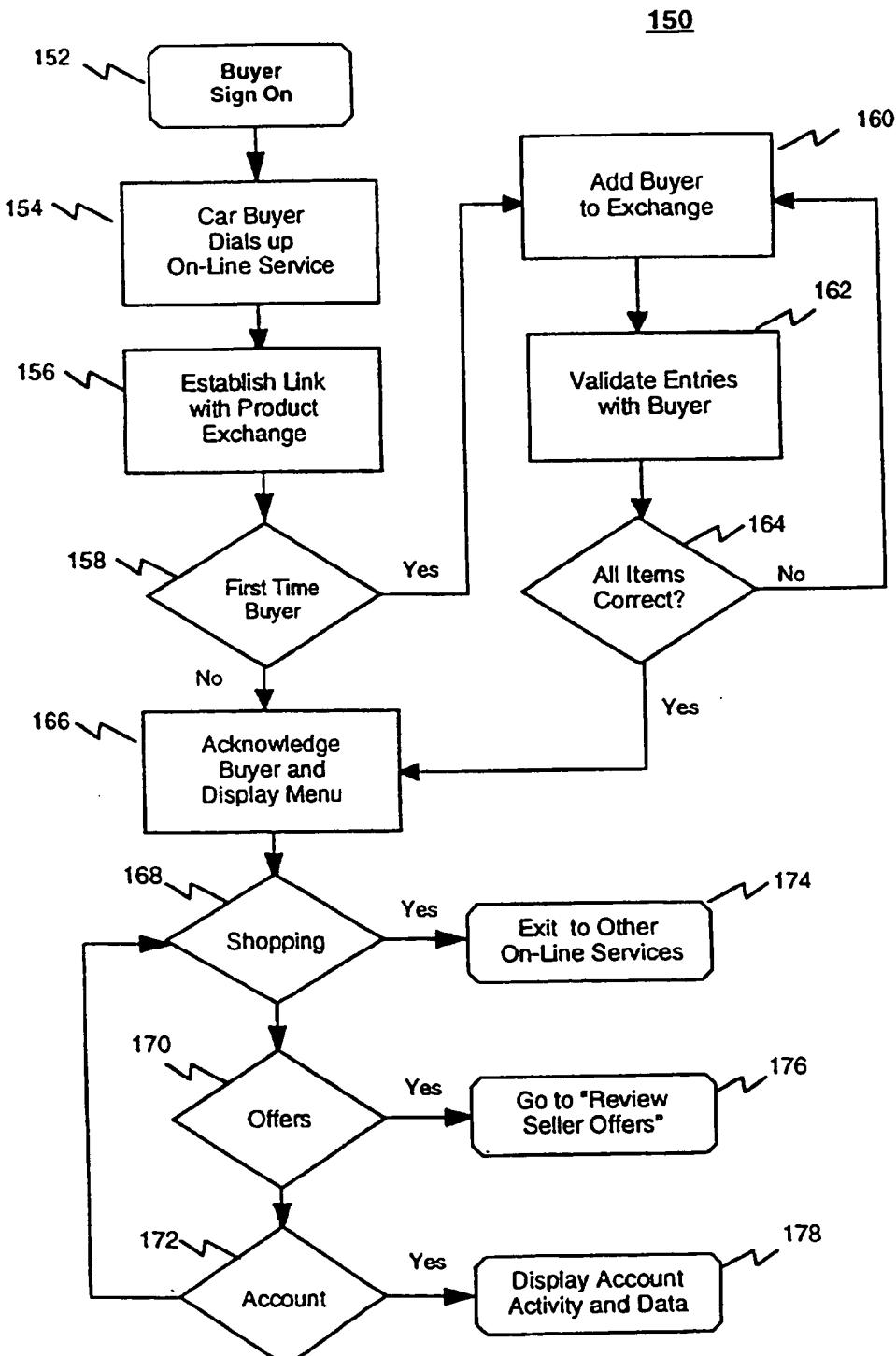


Fig. 6

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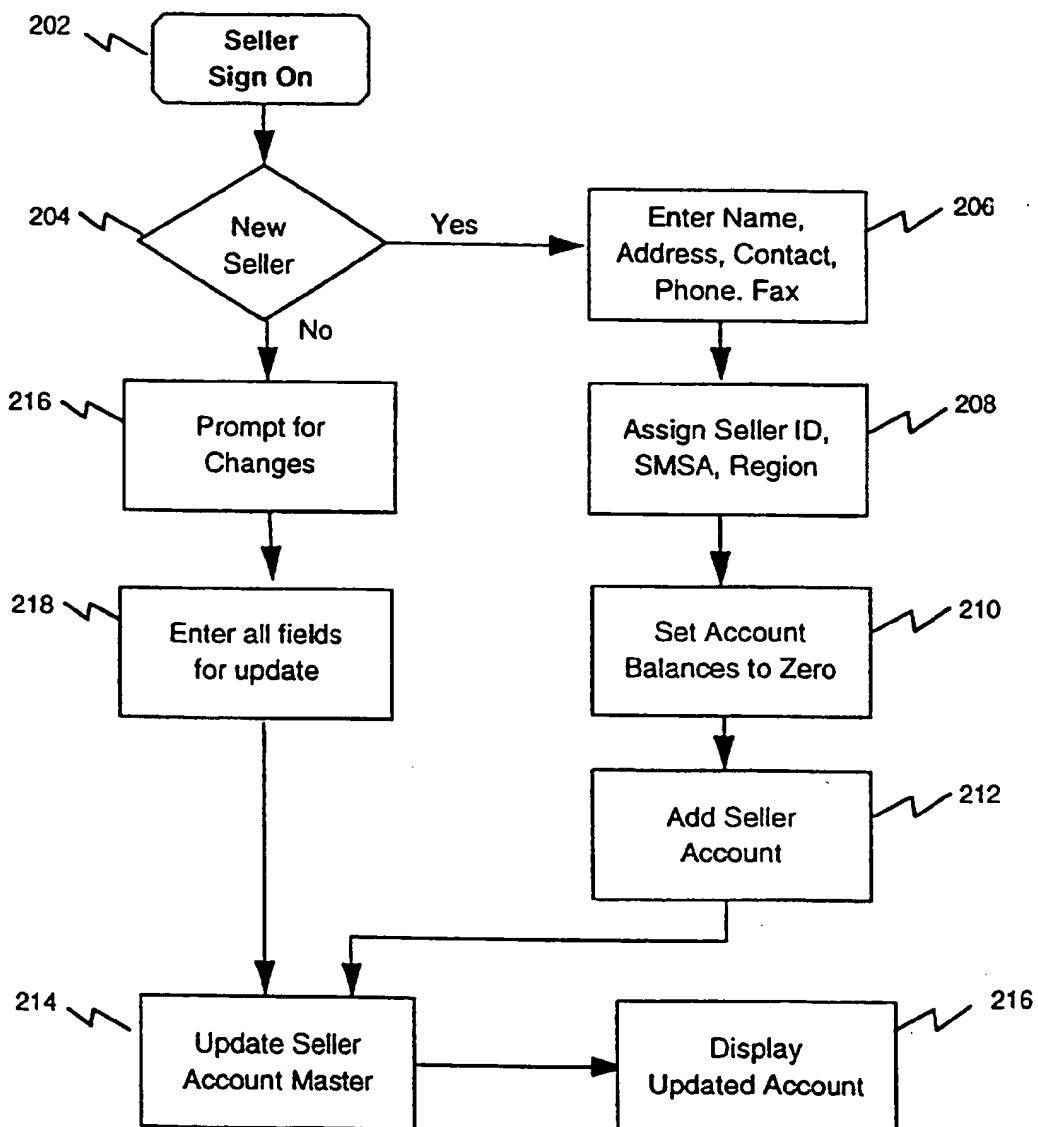
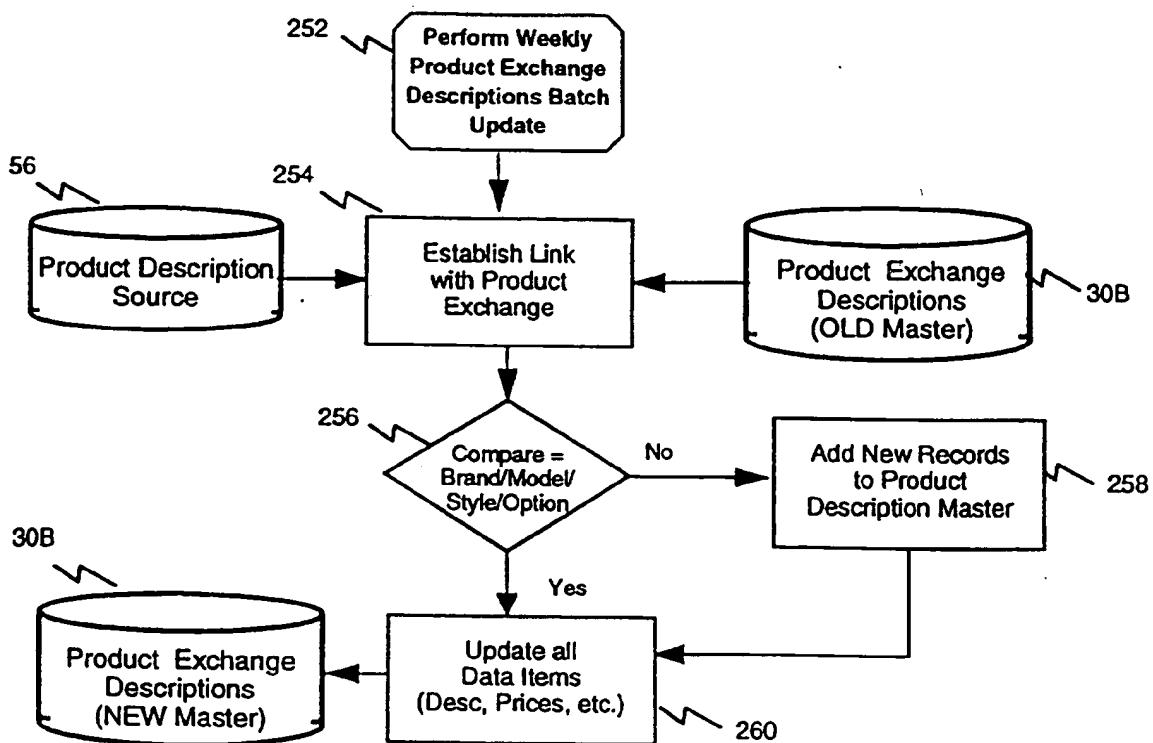
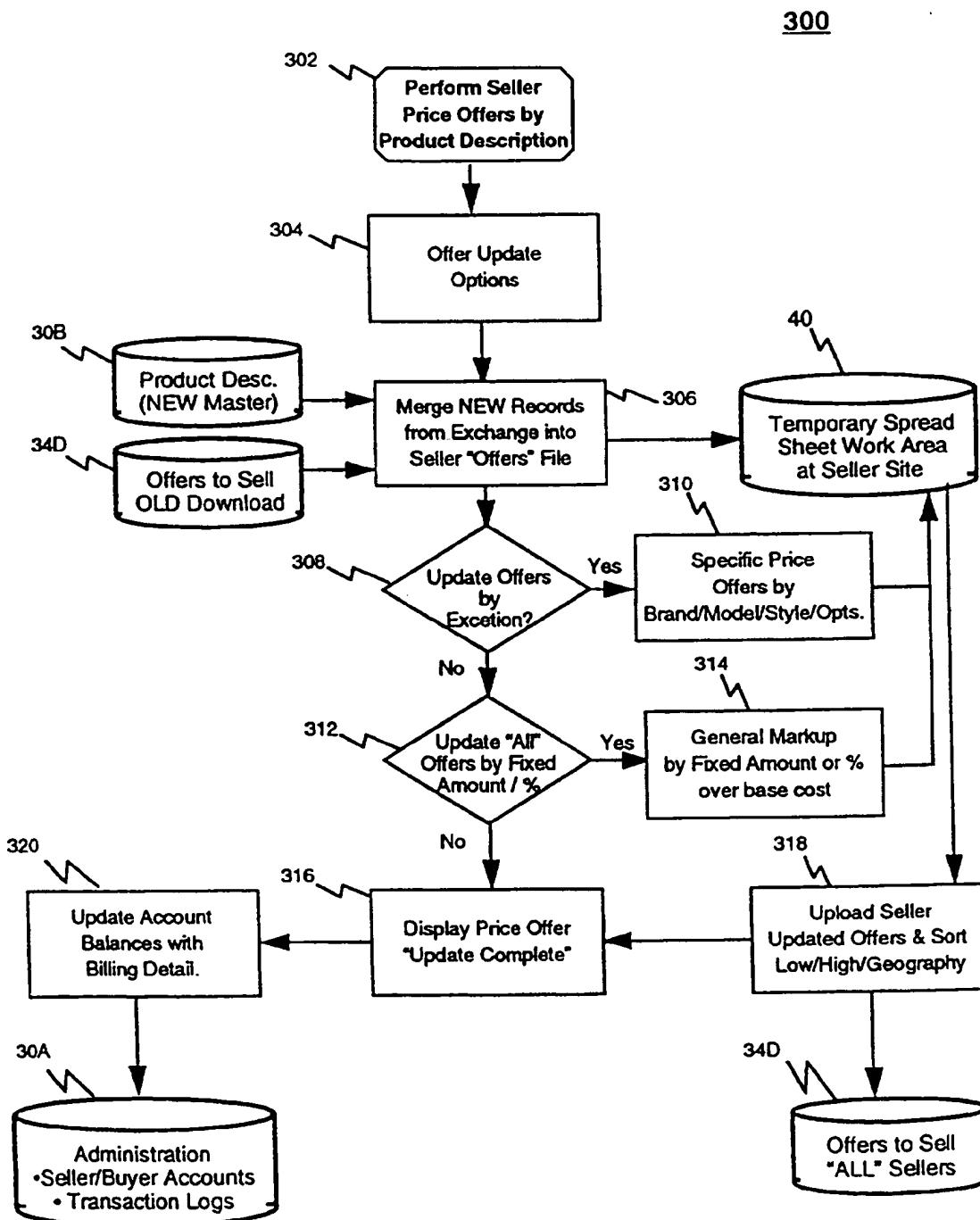
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Fig. 7

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250*Fig. 8*

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**Fig. 9**

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350

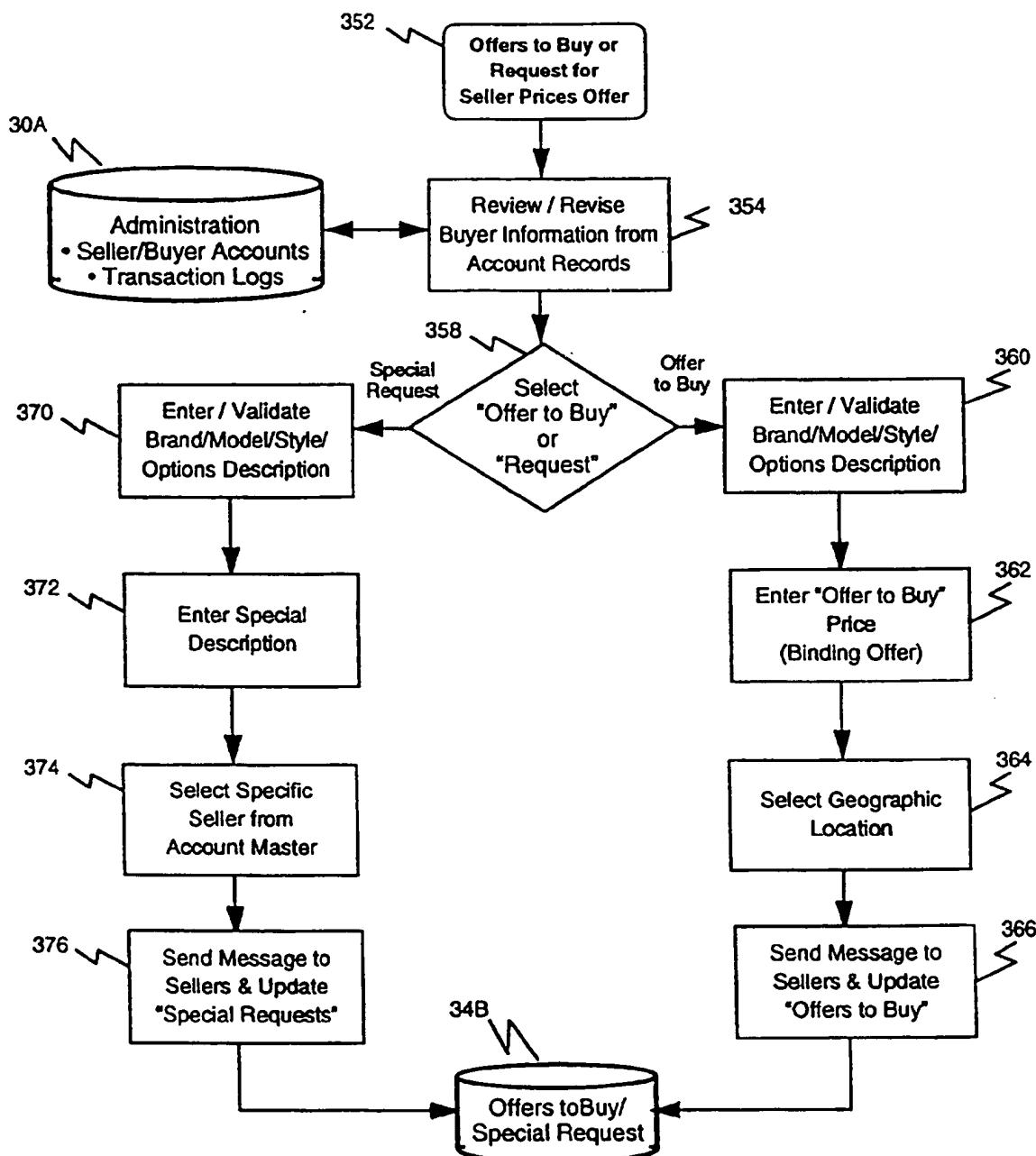


Fig. 10

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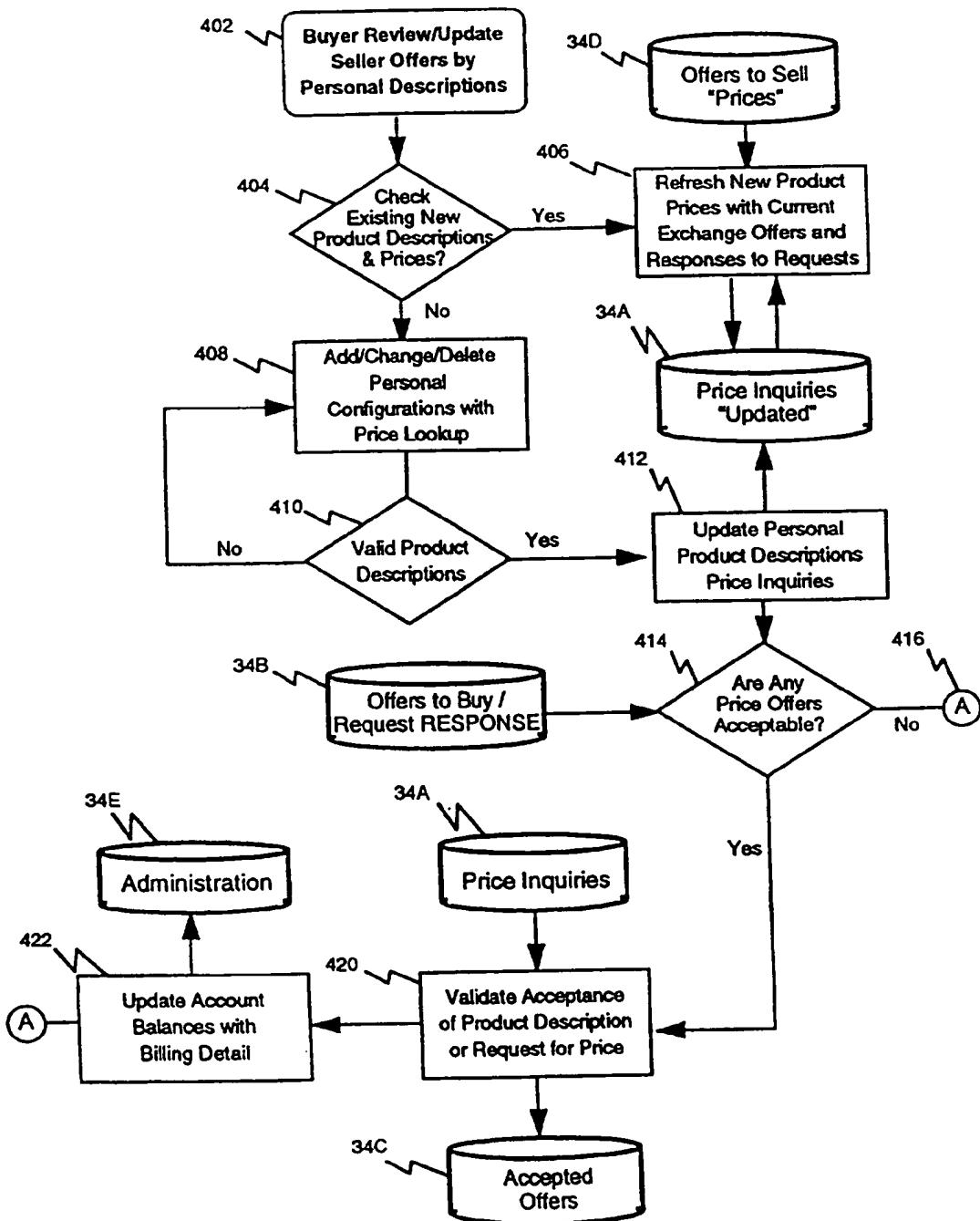
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Fig. 11

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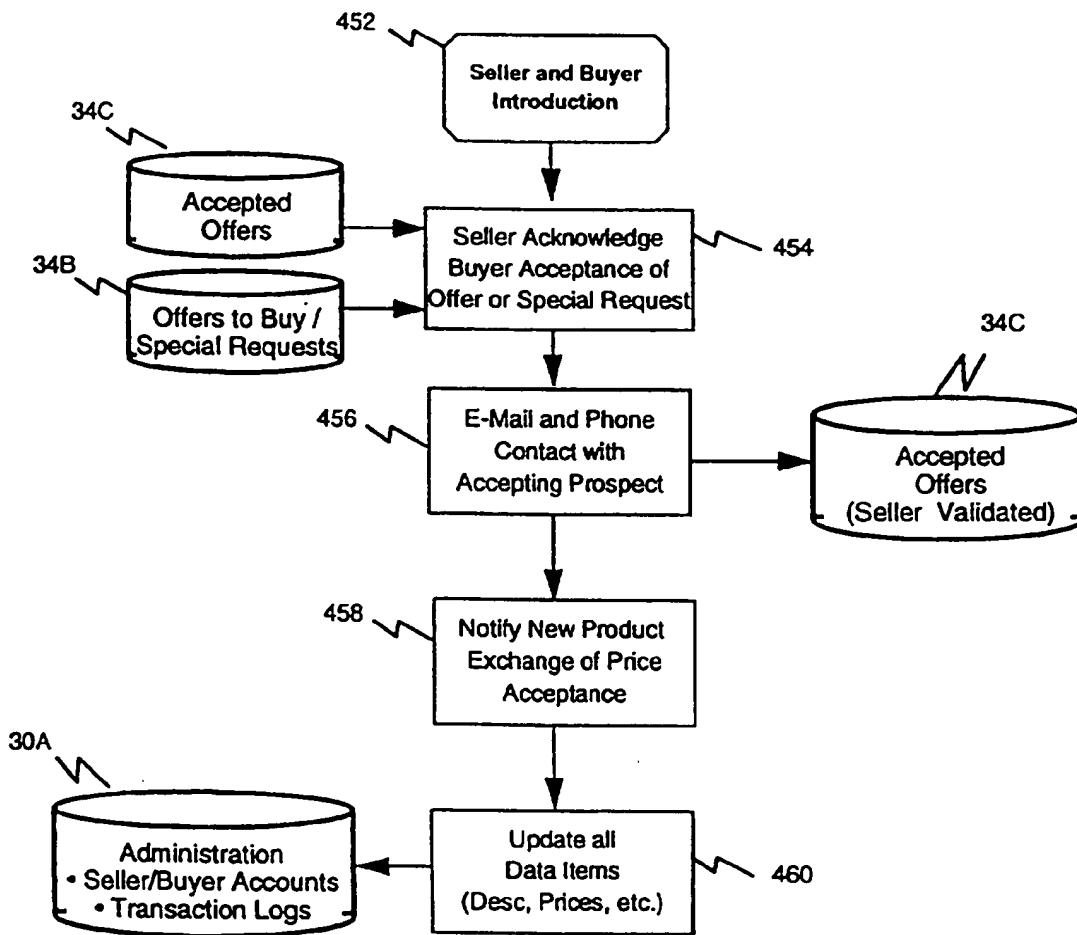
450

Fig. 12

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/US96/16634

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(6) :Please See Extra Sheet.
US CL :395/326, 327

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 395/326, 327

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

APS, DIALOG, MAYA

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X, P	US 4,992,940 A (Dworkin) 12 February 1991, see entire document.	1-8, 10-18, 20-25
Y, P	Announcing DIALORDER Version 2!!!, Dialog Chronolog, October 1986, page 5, lines 25-31.	9, 19, 26
Y, P	Dialog System Seminar I: The Basics, Dialog Information Systems, Inc.,m 1989, Appendix D, page A-33.	9, 19, 26

 Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. See patent family annex.

• Special categories of cited documents:	
•A• document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	•T• later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
•E• earlier document published on or after the international filing date	•X• document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone
•L• document which may throw doubt on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	•Y• document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art
•O• document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means	•&• document member of the same patent family
•P• document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed	

Date of the actual completion of the international search	Date of mailing of the international search report
06 JANUARY 1997	14 FEB 1997
Name and mailing address of the ISA/US Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks Box PCT Washington, D.C. 20231	Authorized officer Gail O. Hayes
Facsimile No. (703) 305-3230	Telephone No. (703) 305-9711

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US96/16634

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER:
IPC (6):

G06F 17/60; G06G 7/52